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BRAC's moves likely to survive

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Virginia's Warner, possible foe, may be busy elsewhere

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Times Aerospace Writer shelbys@htimes.com

Little seemed to stand in the way when the nine-member Base Realignment and Closure Commission's last week quickly voted to send at least 1,755 federal jobs to Huntsville.

And two experts doubt that Sen. John Warner, the Virginia Republican who heads the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee, will wreck the BRAC plan that would pull thousands of Defense Department workers out of northern Virginia.

Wednesday and Thursday, the BRAC panel voted to relocate the Army Materiel Command, the bulk of the Missile Defense Agency and the headquarters of the Army Space & Missile Defense Command from the Washington, D.C., area to Huntsville. By some estimates, those moves could bring an additional 2,000 to 3,000 contractor jobs to Huntsville.

The BRAC panel will forward its report to President Bush by Sept. 8. The president must accept or reject the recommendations as a whole.

By the end of September, the White House will forward the recommendations to Congress, which has 45 working days to accept or reject the plan as a whole.

"Now we are just waiting," Dave Hargrove, incoming president of the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce, said Friday. "It's a cautious optimism."

Could powerful politicians like Warner wreck the BRAC plan?

Warner told The Washington Post in a story Wednesday that Defense Department recommendations for the BRAC were "rigged."

He said Pentagon managers based decisions with real estate management in mind, with the

But rigged or not, it seems the decisions will probably win White House and Capitol Hill approval over the next couple of months, said Dr. Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics.

"It's possible Warner could derail this, but it is highly unlikely," Sabato said by phone Friday. "The whole process was set up to prevent one or a group of lawmakers from changing it."

Sabato said Warner will be busy trying to find ways to save Oceana Naval Air Station and its more than 10,000 jobs it means to the Virginia Beach, Va., area. The BRAC panel gave the state until March to find ways to pay for a crash zone near the base.

"That's going to cost tens of millions, if not $100 million, to buy out homes and businesses," Sabato said. "The local area doesn't have that kind of money, and I doubt the state of Virginia can pay for it all. Warner will probably have to get federal support from somewhere.

"If Warner is irritated enough about the outcome of Oceana, then it is not inconceivable that he could find a way to derail" the BRAC recommendations, "but it is still highly unlikely, and Oceana has some time to deal with its problems."

Otherwise, the Navy installation would move to Jacksonville, Fla.

John Pike, a defense analyst with GlobalSecurity.org in Washington, drew a sharper focus about Warner's motives. "Warner is just trying to get something," Pike said by phone. "He's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease."

Pike doesn't know exactly what Warner might want for his vote to keep the BRAC process moving smoothly on Capitol Hill, but, like Sabato, he thinks it could be money to help Oceana.

A majority of the BRAC decisions were hammered out before the public debates last week, Pike said.

"Most of the BRAC discussions have been theater," Pike said. "The real decisions have been made and were made probably the weekend before" the televised debates began.

Pike pointed out that of the major political decisions that were made last week, many were major bases recommended for closure in key areas that affected Democrats and Republicans.

The Pentagon wanted to close Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota, the New London Submarine Base near Groton, Conn., and Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Maine. The BRAC commission kept them open for what Pike sees as nebulous reasons.

"The only reason given for keeping New London open was naval tradition, and the argument against moving B-1s from Ellsworth to Dyess (Air Force Base in Texas) was that a tornado would destroy them all. Tradition and tornados - that's just not sound judgment."

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